

Rites of Passage

Essay by Imelda Almqvist

Section 1 Hosting Initiation

"If the youth are not initiated, they will burn down the village"

African saying

"Nomadic societies could not allow members to act irresponsibly and antisocially lest the fragile social ecology be ruptured. As an Aboriginal elder once told me: 'For us adolescence lasts five days - the length of the initiation. Before initiation he is a child, after initiation he is an adult'"

David Tacey in "God and Diseases, Making sense of our physical and mental well being"¹

Crying for a Vision

Before I present suggestions for ceremonies and rites of passage that can be performed with young people and their families, there is one more concept I wish to discuss. I already touched upon it in Part I.

In our Western Culture today we are over-protective of our children and we try to keep them out of harm's way. Native American peoples always had (and many still have) a radically different approach. By the time a young person reaches puberty the teenager is sent on a vision quest out in nature by him or herself. They are expected to spend a night out alone on a hill, or in the forest, in the hope that their helping spirits will show themselves and give them pointers for their spiritual calling, for their future life path. Sometimes they literally "cry for a vision"², for a sacred dream to guide them in their lives.

Where have our initiators gone?!

Earlier on in this book I have already talked about the importance of Rites of Passage and Initiation. I have said that if young people are not offered appropriate rites of passage, involving a symbolic death and rebirth, they may freeze developmentally and get stuck at an earlier stage of functioning. The Latin phrase for this is Puer Aeternus (literally eternal boy, more loosely I would translate this as forever child. As for a girl, the phrase would be "Puella Aeterna" but psychoanalysts more commonly use the Greek word Kore or Maiden for this stage of development in girls).

Alternatively young people will create their own rites of passage through thrill-seeking (drugs, street gangs, joy driving, alcohol abuse, sexual acting out). Bungee jumping is extremely popular just now. It combines the elements of a free fall and

rebound - but people are clipped onto a safety harness. In shamanism this makes perfect sense: we all have an innate soul desire to “get over ourselves and move beyond our own ego”. To do this we need to “drop into trust”. We need to drop into the arms of our helping spirits. We need to give up our compulsion to know and control everything and learn to trust that Spirit will take us to the right place, at the right time. So you could say that Spirit provides our safety harness. We need to clip our lifeline onto Spirit if we are to reach our full human and spiritual potential.

Another thing we observe in our society is that many young people are slow to grow up and take on the full set of responsibilities of adult life. We see eternal students, mother’s boys, “ladettes”. Unavailable men have become a cliché and the bane of their lives for many modern women who want to settle down, have children and provide a secure base for those children on all levels: materially, emotionally and spiritually.

So what is going on with our young people?

“The fault of the nuclear family today isn’t so much that it’s crazy and full of double binds (that’s true in communes and corporate offices too – in fact in any group). The fault is that the old men outside the nuclear family no longer offer an effective way for the son to break his link with his parents without doing harm to himself.”

Robert Bly in *Iron John* ³

“Initiation is equivalent to basic change in the existential condition; the novice emerges from his ordeal endowed with a totally different being from that which he possessed before initiation; he has become another”

Mircea Eliade (quoted by Edward Tick in his book *War and the Soul*) ⁴

One of my students commented just last week how we lost our last rite of passage for boys when military service was abolished in the UK. As a rite of passage it was far from perfect, but it was something. (And my very pacifist younger self would not believe I’d ever say that).

On the level of soul we all crave to be touched by The Divine, to experience the realm of the sacred, that which is set aside from the everyday. Myth allows us to enter that realm where the Divine intersects everyday reality: sacred space, power objects, ceremony, ritual, ancient stories that contain powerful teachings about the human condition and human dilemmas. Tick says that myths are the master templates for the patterns of our lives. Therefore all religion has its roots in myth. When our experiences of love, danger, challenge, quest, loss, calling or adventure captivate us, we find ourselves in the realm of myth. Myth also underlies all rituals and rites of passage. Mythology can be a great guide, for myth always takes place in the landscape of the psyche and it reveals the journey from the human soul’s perspective: In Tick’s own words:

“When any country goes to war, it does so in the name of what it holds most sacred. And when any country claims victory, it does so in the name of that holy cause and as proof that it represents the truth”.

Elsewhere in this book I already mentioned the oxymoron of Holy Wars and now we arrive at the explanation. In tribal societies training young men as warriors was a tried and test path of initiation. Young men toughened up and proved themselves in battles. The community provided spiritual support by sending them off ceremonially and welcoming them home with great pomp and circumstance. Often warriors received a new name and new status too, reflecting the great life change that had occurred.

However, today warfare has become so large scale and lethal (think of chemical warfare and weapons of mass destruction) that war is no longer a realistic rite of passage. (So I remain very glad that military service has been abolished in the UK, after all I have three teenage sons!)

One core element that needs making explicit here is that being an adult means defending loved ones, young children, the elderly and cherished moral values when they come under attack. This is one element of war as a rite of passage we actually need to preserve and keep alive. We once again need to teach our young people about their sacred duty to the larger community. A keen observer might remember that this issue did indeed come up in our youth seminar exploring violence!

Millennials

In this context my friend Judith Bogner has brought Millennials to my awareness. The Millennials, (also known as the Millennial Generation or Generation Y) follow in the footsteps of Generation X. Most researchers and social commentators say there were born sometime between the early 1980s and the early 2000s. My own sons might thus be Millennials (all born between 2000 – 2004) or they may be part of Generation Z (Generation Zhaman perhaps? I couldn't resist making the pun!)

As goes for all things and all people, it seems that Millennials have both a light side and shadow side as a collective. On the one hand I am hearing that they have community spirit, that they are not very materialistic (some in Francisco live in converted containers and the same phenomenon has now arrived in London), that they prioritise having a life over having a career. On the other hand I hear that they show a lack of stick-ability (driving Human Resources departments hiring young people for mainstream companies mad) and that they just cannot take the values of people aged 25+ very seriously.

For me this poses an interesting question: do we ever change the world or does the world change as young people with a different level of consciousness are born? And if this is so, do we perhaps only ever pave the way? That is what I like to think I am doing with this work, paving the way, offering a road map (a bit outdated perhaps, but but a map nevertheless), opening sacred space and witnessing the ways of the future being born.

This is connected to my next question:

Is it the job of elders, youth leaders, shamanic teachers and practitioners to host initiation?

In the shamanic teacher community I myself have participated in debates about this.

Some say that for our culture to be healthy and for young people (and people of all ages) to complete certain life cycles spiritually speaking, we need to arrive at an understanding of symbolic death and rebirth or dark nights of the soul (to use a Christian phrase that may be more familiar). We need to actively teach young people how to embrace such ordeals and extract spiritual insights, wisdom and personal strength from them.

Some shamanic teachers (like me) do see it as their responsibility to provide experiences of initiation for students. When I started my own shamanic practitioner training I experienced a life burial⁴. I was asked to dig my own grave for four days (it was the hardest physical work I have ever done. Every stone and clod of clay represented my own ego I was chipping away at). I will always be extremely grateful for this initiation. It shaped me. It also shaped my ideas about what needs to be included in the training of a shamanic practitioner.

Another school of thought says that we do not need to initiate shamanic practitioners because if we do not, Life will. The very fact of leading a life in a human body on Earth means we move through initiations and many small symbolic deaths ultimately prepare us for our final death and rebirth in the world of spirit. This is certainly true on one level, but it is my personal belief that human beings need human initiators who have been initiated themselves. A lineage of initiators thus passes on the gifts, wisdom and traditions of many generations. A related phenomenon I observe (working with both teenagers and adult students) is that it is often kinder to initiate people, because elder-led initiation builds in the support and sacred space that those being initiated need so badly. Not doing so just means that Life will come down with a sledge hammer at some later time and do the job more harshly. There is a fine line between finding strength through initiation and being traumatised for life.

This is one of the (many) reasons why the de-valuing old people in our society wounds and deprives our whole culture. When we lose our elders and initiators, we fail to grow up fully. If a population remains stuck in immature consciousness, their leaders will make short-term decisions, decisions without long term vision. Everyone suffers. The planet suffers. Future generations suffer and are short-changed before they are even born.

I will again mention the Seven Generations concept in this context: the Seventh Generation Principle is based on the Iroquois cosmology. Every decision we make today should contribute to a sustainable world and so every decision needs to stretch seven generations into the future. Today this principle is often quoted (in our culture) in discussions about fossil resources, pollution, the state of drinking water, deforestation and so forth. However the Iroquois people themselves would emphasize that this principle ought to apply to all and any significant decision anyone makes.

The Wound in Vulnerability

Earlier in this book I have spoken about vulnerability. We develop many behaviors that allow us to hide and run from vulnerability: anger, blaming, shaming, addiction, numbing, escapism... Yet, as Brene Brown's research⁶ shows, vulnerability is at the heart of leading an authentic life, a life of integrity, where our sacred wholeness shines through the "cracks" that the School of Earth Life inflicts. One of the (no longer understood in our culture) purposes of initiation is to inflict a wound under relatively safe and controlled circumstances, so "it is done at the right time in a human lifespan", from a great cosmic point of view, and a larger wound inflicted by Fate under far less safe circumstances is avoided. And I think many of us are familiar with C.G. Jung's famous words:

"When an inner situation is not made conscious, it appears outside as fate"

Bly too words it perfectly:

"Ancient initiation practices would affect all these responses (examples: paralysis, robot behaviour, seriously pursued numbness IA) since it gives a new wound, or gives a calculated wound sufficiently pungent and vivid – though minor – so that the young man remembers his inner wounds. The initiation then tells the young man what to do with his wounds, the new and the old"

For me the concepts initiation and vulnerability are close relatives. Initiation imposes ordeals and wounds but ultimately those wounds are the cracks that allow our soul light to shine. Here the image of a carved Halloween pumpkin comes to my mind and I used this metaphor with my shamanic practitioner students last week. If we didn't carve the pumpkin, it would never have a face and individuality. It would never shape shift into a lantern. It remains just a pumpkin. The inside of such a pumpkin is quite dense, with a lot of fleshy hairy material. If we try to put a candle inside such an un-carved pumpkin, any flame would perish for lack of oxygen (if we could squeeze it in at all).

Cycling back to Mircea Eliade⁵ for a moment: initiation is about arriving at something other, we are no longer the person we were before, we return changed, as someone other and our society needs to honour and celebrate this.

Another way of saying this is that all human beings need a healthy sense of self to live an independent life and make wise choices. But the human ego can get in the way, become very limiting, keeping us in the comfort zone, keeping us overly focussed on our own needs. (Writing this in September 2015, just see the responses refugees from Syria invoke in many people all over Europe. "Please don't come and upset the established order and our comfortable lives!"). There needs to be (what we call in shamanism) a shattering of the egoic container if we are to become containers for Divine Light to shine through. There even needs to be a shattering of the larger egoic containers of whole societies and cultures.

Societies too have both egoic structures and a Shadow. Cycling back to the image of the Jack-o-lantern: only a pumpkin which has been carved in many places can become a true lantern or even beacon, radiating Divine light (soul light if you like) in all directions. Only a lantern that is lit can show others the way in darkness. If a

large group of people perceives egoic and self-serving thinking as “truth”, collectively we can be sucked into disputes and even wars. Staying in close communication with our spirit allies can help us avoid that (sadly very common) state of affairs.

Mothers and sons, fathers and daughters

I am a mother of three sons they are all shape shifting teenagers at the time of writing. When our own sons have hit certain stages of development where a spiritual intervention was called for – and the children themselves agreed. This was decided in communication with them, not for them – I have called on my colleague and friend Nick Taylor. He has taken them out on the land and done mysterious things with them. It is not for me to know exactly what happened there. The spiritual task of any teenage boy is pull away from his parents (and the domain of the mother, the opposite sex parent, in particular) and stand on his own feet, surrounded by peers and other role models. Yet a shamanic teacher colleague was telling me the other day that her children have grown up absorbing everything she embodies and they now feel perfectly ready to create their own rites of passage. As she says: ceremony is innate in us. We do not always need others to host or facilitate this for us. This is a fair comment. The artist in me wishes to paint the full rainbow of possibilities, use all options on the great palette of creation.

It certainly raises the following question: what spiritual wisdom do the parents embody? Many parents have ditched the religion of their childhood, because it feels like a can of worms, and left their children without a spirit canoe on the tempestuous waters of life. Other parents teach and embody forms of spirituality that their children reject. I was raised as a Roman Catholic and as soon as I left home, I moved on with gratitude for what I had received but a deep inner knowing that this was not the path for me.

So what options are out there for young people? What is on offer? Can we respect them enough to give them the space to express their innate soul connection to the Divine, in whatever form that takes for them? Shamanism is not for everyone, I am well aware of that and I will never try to convert anyone. There is no True Faith (to use a catch-phrase from my own childhood). However, to stay sane and healthy on the level of soul we all need a spiritual orientation and cosmology (in the sense of our own understanding of the cosmos or universe).

Working with teenagers I feel most at ease working with teenage girls. When people ask me to work with 14 – 16 year old boys, I will always tell them about Nick. I ask the parent to ask the young man: would they perhaps prefer to work with a person of the same sex? I cannot claim to know the world of teenage boys (other than having a house full of them!) I have no first-hand experience of being a teenage boy. To be a safe and trustworthy practitioner I need to know my limits. For me that means sometimes pointing out to people that there are other choices than working with me and promoting other people’s work. No two practitioners have exactly the same strengths or blind spots. That is why community is so important. Nick takes groups of young people out on his ancestral land, in Wales. I live in London. (I take people to Nunhead Cemetery if I need a wild place on my doorstep! It is lovely but not quite the same as the wilds of Wales).

Our work is spirit-led and child-led. The needs of any particular child/youngster at any given time are going to be a mandala (sacred circle) in which location, the interests and lifestyle of their parents, the kind of school they attend, the friends they have are all going to be shaping forces. The soul of the child and the spirit allies (both yours and theirs) will always tell you what needs to be done. (If you can polish your mirror and push your own preconceptions out of the way, that is).

I find myself telling people proudly about the work Nick is doing in Wales and the work we have done there together. People will say: "Oh I see, you take them camping!" And I feel a bit defensive: "Well, hang on.... Nick does a lot more than just taking them camping...." However, on reflection, maybe families that go camping naturally build in experiences of initiation? Children climbing trees (and maybe falling out of a tree or getting stuck up there), getting lost in the forest and finding their way home again, eating mushrooms or berries in the forest and maybe learning that not all such things are edible.... Maybe my mind insists on a dividing line that does not always need to be there?

I am not a camping kind of person myself but our family has sailed all around the Caribbean and up the coast of Central America. We have certainly seen our children move through initiations in those sailing years (swimming with sharks, being bitten by a wild dog, being pestered by monkeys on a beach in Honduras, our eldest son being taken by the current out to open sea and being rescued by a dive boat due to Divine intervention etc.)

To cut a long story short: your own helping spirits and the children/young people themselves will tell you if "organised initiation" is on the menu - or not. Practitioners, always make a point of checking for initiations that have already occurred naturally. Initiations are always on the curriculum in the School of Life.

I will finish this chapter by stating my firm opinion: the world needs the return of Elders and Initiators. And our culture pays an immense price for having made both redundant. This imbalance, this failure to grow up spiritually speaking, is affecting all sentient beings, the way we take care of our planet, the relationships between men and women - and ultimately our relationship with ourselves.

9th March 2016

Notes

1 Gods and Diseases, Making sense of our physical and mental wellbeing, by David Tacey, Routledge, Reprint edition, 2012

2 I thank shamanic teacher Simon Buxton for introducing me to the concepts of Crying for a Vision and Life Burial.

3 Iron John: A Book About Men by Robert Bly, Rider, New Ed edition, 2001

4 War and the Soul, Healing Our Nations Veterans from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, Edward Tick, Quest Books, U.S., 1st Quested Ed Edition, 2005

5 The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion by Mircea Eliade, Harcourt Australia, Underlining/Highlighting edition, 1959

6 Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent and Lead, Penguin life, 2015